

Molasses Mill

By Richard Van Wagoner

Prior to 1891, when the Lehi Sugar Factory began processing white sugar from beets, molasses made from sorghum cane was the principal sweetener in pioneer homes. Lehi historian A. B. Anderson mused in the 7 March 1947, Lehi Free Press that “A person without a slice of bread and molasses can was without both a dire need and a real luxury. A home without a barrel of molasses was not ready for winter.”

In 1863, Brigham Young, after lamenting the failure of the church’s first attempt to produce sugar from sugar beets. furthered his campaign for self-sufficiency by advising the raising of sorghum cane. Free seed was distributed to anyone requesting it. In Lehi, as elsewhere in the territory, a farmer’s sugar cane fields became as important as his grain. And the cane was not difficult to grow, though it grew best on the benchlands. It was planted in rows and hills and irrigated just like corn. When it reached maturity in the fall, the leaves were stripped from the standing were then cut off at ground level with a corn-cutter and placed in piles where they would be ready to be hauled to the mill.

Scores of horse and water-powered molasses roller mills were established throughout the territory. While Lehi had several small operations, the largest mill--which became part of Lehi’s United Order in 1874 was built on the northeast corner of Center and Sixth North (where the Central School would later be and where Josephine Cooper’s house in in 1989). This site provided sufficient water for a water wheel (from the Lehi ditch nearby) as well as sufficient ground to pile each farmer’s individual stack of sugar cane.

The huge water wheel, eighteen feet in diameter rotated on two strong wooden posts. The four-foot-wide wooden wheel contained numerous water boxes. At water filled each one the weight turned the wheel and kept it in perpetual motion. Attached to the wheel’s axle on the east side were two iron rollers

(manufactured by blacksmith Joseph J. Smith) so arranged that when the sugar cane was fed through, it was crushed and the juice squeezed out.

After spilling into collecting cisterns beneath the rollers, the juice was conveyed to the cooker-a long, wide metal pan on a foundation, open at one end for the fire, closed at the other end for the chimney. The raw, green-colored cane juice was rapidly boiled and the “green skimmings” taken off and discarded. As the juice gradually thickened, the “yellow skimmings” were removed. Lehi historian Walter L. Webb observed that “the boy or girl who could get William Gurney, the cooker man, to give them a bucketful of these were lucky. It made the best candy known to the pioneers and often led to a candy pulling party where many pioneer romances were born.

When the time came for a farmer’s cane to be ground in the mill he was notified to bring his molasses barrel to the site. Most of these storage containers were homemade wooden barrels large enough to hold the family sweetener for a year. The opening of the barrel prior to taking it to the mill was a much-anticipated event. The bottom usually consisted of an inch or two of moist brown sugar, which was a much-loved treat for children.

As Lehi flourished the site of the molasses mill became a valuable building location. The old wood water wheel was dismantled and removed to a site north of town and west of the cemetery where a new cooker was built. This mill operated until the Lehi Sugar Factory opened in 1891.